Create and Live the Life You Love

The Happiness Advantage-A New Method to Unlock Potential-SHAWN ACHOR

Shawn Achor, a leading expert on human potential, spoke at three standing-room-only events for the Common Ground Speaker Series in November 2010. Achor, author of The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology That Fuel Success and Performance at Work, spent more than a decade at Harvard University where he won numerous distinguished teaching awards. He first captured international acclaim for helping design and teach Harvard’s legendary psychology course on the science of happiness. Achor now directs Good Think, Inc., a consulting firm that utilizes the latest research to help organizations capitalize on “the happiness advantage.” More information about Achor may be found at www.shawnachor.com.

On rethinking happiness and success: Most of us were taught a broken formula as children. We were told that if we worked hard enough and willingly postponed happiness, then one day our sacrifices would pay off and we would be successful enough to finally experience happiness. But, recent discoveries in the field of positive psychology and neuroscience indicate that this formula is actually backward - happiness fuels success, not the other way around. When we are positive, our brains become more engaged, creative and productive.

On America’s unhappiness epidemic: In today’s hard-driving and materialistic culture, too many Americans operate on the “if only” principle of happiness that continually recalibrates our standards of success. We believe we will be happy if only we manage to get good grades, then if only we get into a good school, then if only we land a good job or make more money or marry well. Working as a freshman proctor at Harvard, Achor noticed that many students (and their parents) assumed that getting into an elite school would guarantee happiness. Yet, within weeks the glow of acceptance waned and many freshman became dissatisfied. They isolated themselves from their peers and loved ones in the pursuit of even higher achievement. A campus survey found that four out of five Harvard students experienced at least one period of debilitating depression as an undergraduate, a pattern consistent on many other competitive college campuses.

On the power of positive psychology: Working with his mentor, Dr. Ben Tal Sharar, Achor helped create Harvard’s first course in positive psychology in 2006. Almost 1000 students showed up on the first day and the class quickly became the school’s most popular course. “We began to realize that these students were there because they were hungry. They were starving to be happier, not some time in the future, but in the present. And they were there because despite all the advantages they enjoyed, they still felt unfulfilled…” Achor conducted an empirical study of 1,600 Harvard undergraduates, concentrating on the “positive outliers” individuals who scored above the curve in terms of performance, achievement, productivity, energy or resilience. His findings led him to formulate a practical guide to achieve what he calls the “happiness advantage.”

On The Happiness Advantage:” Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience prove that “positive” brains have a biological advantage over brains that are neutral or negative. Furthermore, we can train ourselves to become happier and more productive by repeating positive behaviors that affect the brains’ neuroplasticity. Research indicates that it takes a minimum of 21 days of consistent practice for a behavior to become ingrained. He recommends the following exercises to dramatically change our cognitive function:

* Make gratitude a life habit: Each day jot down three specific things that you are grateful for and fully explain why each is important to you.
* Keep a gratitude journal: Concentrate on meaningful experiences and write down as many positive details as you can remember. Research has proven that keeping a journal for six weeks can create new positive neural tracts, decrease stress and even reduce the need for medication.
* Exercise: It improves motivation, reduces stress and increases feelings of mastery and engagement. Exercise has been proven to increase one’s IQ for two hours after the activity ends.
* Meditate: In a hectic world of multitasking and information overload, meditation trains our brain to do one thing at a time. Even a few simple moments of daily focus can have enormous benefits, such as taking your hands off the computer keyboard for two minutes each day and breathing deeply.
* Perform conscious acts of kindness: Altruism has been proven to decrease stress and significantly enhance mental health. Achor makes it a practice to start his day by praising someone in a short email. He says community service projects help families develop greater happiness and achieve more success.

On happier students: According to Achor’s research, the happiest and most successful college students feel grateful for their opportunities and therefore are more open to growth. Those who focus on negatives (e.g. homework, deadlines) perform less well and often develop health issues. To be happy and successful, he says young people need to believe that their actions matter. They need a strong support network and a mindset that views stress as an exciting challenge, not a threat. Research has shown that 90% of long term human happiness is related to how we choose to interpret our experiences. Therefore, optimism is an essential life skill to teach our children.

On happier parenting: The small positive changes we make in our lives ripple out to others. When parents consciously choose to be positive, they empower their families to greater success. Studies have consistently shown that “our belief in another person’s potential brings that potential to life. The expectations that we have of our children, our spouse, whether or not it is voiced, can make that expectation a reality.”

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